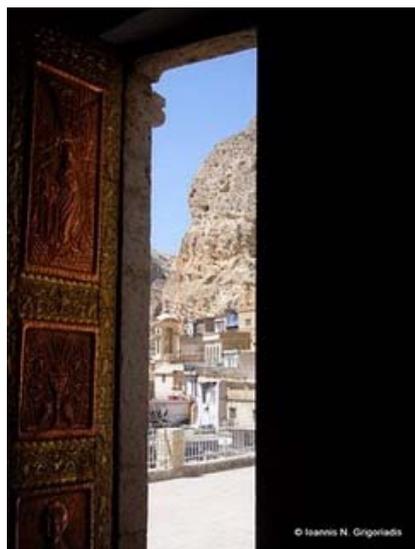


Op-Ed Pieces

A Collection of Op-Ed Pieces written by Ioannis N. Grigoriadis

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Levantine Christianity and Greece: Ending an Era of Indifference



St. Thecla Church, Maalula, Syria

When one talks about the Middle East, Islam comes to mind. The identification of the region with one only of the monotheistic religions which were born in its territory is understandable given that the overwhelming majority of its population is Muslim and that since the launch of the "Clash of Civilizations" debate the Middle East has come to be understood as the quintessential Islamic part of the world. Yet this identification is inaccurate. The Middle East still hosts significant populations of Christians in several countries. And their role is nowhere more influential than in the Levant.

It is impossible to visit Syria for example and not come across its strong Christian heritage. Christians in Syria may be as much as 10 percent of the country's population in a country of roughly 22 million. They are fragmented into numerous churches, which were the product of numerous political and dogmatic divisions, as well as the Crusades. The eastern part of the walled old city of Damascus is still dominated by its Christian communities. Greek Orthodox, Greek Catholic, Armenian Gregorian, Armenian Catholic, Assyrian and Chaldean churches mark the skyline of the most touristic part of Damascus. The boroughs of Bab Tuma (Thomas Gate) and Bab Sharki (Eastern Gate) are completely different from the rest of the old city. Full of bars and cafes, they are frequented by the hundreds of Western students who visit Damascus to learn Arabic.

What makes Syrian –and other Levantine– Christians even more interesting from a Greek point of view, is that they maintain the name which used to characterise all the Orthodox of the Ottoman Empire. They are still officially called Rum, "Romioi" in other words, although their mother tongue is Arabic. While the term "Rum" was marginalised in the Balkans by terms such as "Greek", "Bulgarian",

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"Serbian" and "Romanian" as a result of the Enlightenment and the rise of several nationalistic movements, it was not effaced in the Middle East. The Levant is the only part of the post-Ottoman world where the word "Rum" retains its relevance as well as its complex religious-political significance. It is no accident that the political system of Lebanon remains based on the confessional divisions of the Lebanese people. This can also be seen in the old cities of Syria which maintain the confessional division of their neighbourhoods. What used to be the case throughout the Ottoman Empire, religious diversity and division of cities on religious and confessional grounds, survives today only in the Levant.

It is also interesting to compare the historic paths of two similar communities. The Turkish-speaking Rum of Anatolia (Karamanli) and the Arabic-speaking Rum of the Levant maintained their religious identity, despite belonging to non-Greek linguistic groups. The former were early admitted as an indispensable part of the Greek "imagined community." Throughout the nineteenth century major efforts were made with the aim to spread the Greek language and consolidate the Greek national identity of the Karamanlis. No such effort was made towards the direction of the Levant Rum. The involvement of European Great Powers in Levantine affairs and the focus of the Greek "Megali Idea" on the Balkans and the Ionian Coast of the Aegean meant that Greece would never invite the Arab-speaking Levant Rum to join the Greek national identity. On the one hand, the collapse of the Ottoman Empire, the clash of competing Greek and Turkish nationalisms and the population exchange agreement of 1923 gave the final answer to the question of the Karamanli identity. Karamanlis were en masse deported to Greece, because they were understood by the parties not only as Rum, but also as Greek.

On the other hand, Levantine Christian communities spearheaded another ideological movement which would shake the Middle East: pan-Arabism. Due to their close economic and cultural links with the West, they would also introduce nationalism and enlightenment ideas in the Levant. Two of the most influential leaders of the pan-Arabist movement, Michel Aflaq, the founder of the pan-Arabist Baath party and an emblematic figure of pan-Arabism, was a Rum from Syria and George Antonius, the author of the first nationalistic history of the Arabs was a Rum from Lebanon. Their Christian identity did not prevent them from wishing to instrumentalize Islam to form together with the Arabic language the cement of a united, strong Arab nation. While pan-Arabist dreams found their nemesis in the Arab-Israeli wars, and in particular in the 1967 "War of Six Days", Levantine Christians maintain their disproportionate to their size influence in the intellectual life of their respective countries. Syria's secular regime, Lebanon's multi-confessional constitution and Jordan's sensitive relationship with the West also guarantee that Levantine Christians are unlikely to face a drastic deterioration of their status in the near term. Yet the persistent Middle Eastern conflicts and demographic trends may indeed tilt the balance against Christians in the longer term. Thousands of Levantine Christians have emigrated from the region as a result of the Arab-Israeli conflict and the wars in Lebanon.

So where is Greece in all this? Following the exclusion of all Levantine Christians from the Greek nation, Greece has failed to pursue a strategy of engagement with these communities. Limited contacts through the Damascus-based Patriarchate of Antioch have failed to deliver much. In some cases the involvement of religious NGOs such as the infamous "Solidarity" of the Church of Greece led to acrimony and disputes instead of promoting relations. This indifference is not unrelated to the overall marginalisation of the Middle East, as far as Greek strategic priorities were concerned. Greece was envisioned as a European

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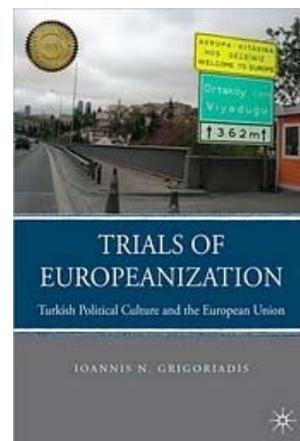
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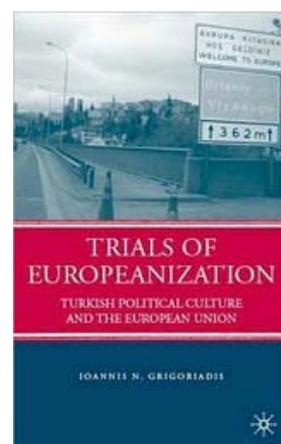
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and hence Balkan country and was willing to dispose of its Eastern Mediterranean identity which would make it an integral part of the Levant. While discussing these in times of financial crisis might be a bit of luxury, it is imperative that Greece reconsiders its strategy to include the Middle East as one of its key action areas. The Levantine Christians could help Greece reconnect with one of the most important regions in the world.

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